

Issue brief

SDG 15

PROMOTING THE SUSTAINABILITY OF TERRESTRIAL ECOSYSTEMS AND HALTING DESERTIFICATION, LAND DEGRADATION AND BIODIVERSITY LOSS

Sustainable Development Goal 15 (SDG 15) – **Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.**

UN Environment, together with other organizations, are responsible for the following indicators:

- ➔ 15.1.2: Proportion of important sites for terrestrial and freshwater biodiversity that are covered by protected areas, by ecosystem type
- ➔ 15.4.1: Coverage by protected areas of important sites for mountain biodiversity
- ➔ 15.6.1: Number of countries that have adopted legislative, administrative and policy frameworks to ensure fair and equitable sharing of benefits
- ➔ 15.9.1: Progress towards national targets established in accordance with Aichi Biodiversity Target 2 of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020
- ➔ 15.a.1: Official development assistance on conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and ecosystem
- ➔ 15.b.1: Official development assistance on forest conservation and sustainable forest management

Environmental dimension of SDG 15

The rising global demand for food to feed the 9 billion people that will populate the planet by 2050 combined with the continuing environmental and land degradation underlines the urgency for achieving a transformation toward sustainable land use. To ensure that no one is left behind we must endeavor to secure healthy and productive land. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides an opportunity to work globally towards this end.

Examples of nature's contributions to people, often referred to as ecosystem services, include the provision of food, raw materials, cultural identity and support for physical, mental and emotional health. Biodiversity enhances these services and indeed underpins many of them, e.g. pollination of crops. However, declining biodiversity and degraded ecosystems driven by such external pressures as development, pollution, and land use change are threatening especially poor and vulnerable

communities, as narrowing sources of food, medicine, fuel and clean water combined with land degradation and soil erosion create detrimental impacts upon subsistence lifestyles and smallholder farmers in particular.

Restoring degraded rangelands, for example, brings multiple social, economic and environmental benefits to local land users as well as to global society. Carbon stored in the soil translates into higher soil fertility and moisture, which provides benefits to rangeland managers through improved productivity.

Land degradation and soil pollution have been identified as posing a serious socio-economic and health issue. Land degradation is triggered by drought, population growth, pollution, intensive farming practices, overgrazing, overexploitation, urbanization and climate change. Sustainable land management integrating cross sector participation is an urgent action needed requiring international community's immediate attention and support to: a) combat desertification and land

- ➔ Every minute, 23 hectares of arable land are lost due to drought and desertification.
- ➔ Over the last two decades, approximately 20 per cent of the Earth's vegetated surface has shown persistent declining trends in productivity, mainly due to unsustainable land and water use and management practices.
- ➔ Every year, 13 million hectares of forest are lost that are home to more than 80 per cent of all land-based species and which provide livelihood to 1.6 billion people.
- ➔ The increased vulnerability to environment stresses, especially of the poor, women and children, can lead to an intensified competition for scarce natural resources and result in migration, instability and conflict.
- ➔ Women and girls are disproportionately and differently affected by environmental degradation, pollution and natural and human-made disasters, and it is important to recognize the fundamental contributions of women to the conservation, protection and management of ecosystems and natural resources.
- ➔ Increased security of tenure and gender equity can be enabling factors for the adoption and scale up of more responsible land management practices.





© Boudewijn-huysmans/unsplash

degradation effectively; b) promote sustainable policies and use of natural resources; and c) improve adaptation to climate change. Land use in agriculture and forestry must be based on a scientific assessment of land capacity and the annual depletion of topsoil.

UN Environment and SDG 15

The protection of our land resources must be a high priority if we are to make a transition to a more sustainable society.

UN Environment Assembly resolution 2/16 adopted in 2016 on “Mainstreaming biodiversity for well-being” acknowledges that the integration of policies set out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is an adequate approach for promoting the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity in various sectors, including agriculture, forestry, fisheries and tourism, among others, which are interconnected, inter alia, with food security, economic growth, human health, the improvement of living conditions and the enjoyment of a healthy environment. The resolution calls on Member States to promote the integrated approach in their national policies, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development.

In its resolution 3/2 on “Pollution mitigation by mainstreaming biodiversity into key sectors”, the UN Environment Assembly recognized that “a healthy environment is a fundamental condition for the well-being of all life forms” and requested UN Environment Executive Director to “promote close coordination, collaboration and synergies



© Harshil-Gudka/unsplash

related to mainstreaming biodiversity among relevant organizations of the UN system”. In this context, UN Environment is working towards developing and promoting integrated approaches and land use planning to the benefit of all the SDGs.

UN Environment in the promotion of integrated and landscape approaches

Addressing the issues of equity, environment and poverty have been at the heart of work by UN Development Programme-UN Environment Poverty Environment Initiative. In addition, the Convention on Biological Diversity’s Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization provides a framework to define how genetic material is accessed and how benefits from its use are shared between people and countries either using or providing the resource; over 100 countries have now ratified the Protocol. Social equity in the context of protected areas also figures highly in Target 11 of the Convention on Biological Diversity Aichi Biodiversity targets. UN Environment has been working alongside partners to improve our understanding of assessing and advancing equity in protected area management.

Combining forces with other UN Agencies, UN Environment has supported the development of national biodiversity strategy and action plans (NBSAPs), which if implemented can contribute significantly to SDG 15 in some 150 countries. Real success was achieved where implementation committees or delivery units, with cross-sectoral representation were convened and remain in place for implementation. Reaching out to sectors to develop sustained relationship for co-delivery of NBSAP actions is another successful approach.

UN Environment leads the UN Programme on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (UN-REDD) support to countries on addressing and respecting the Cancun safeguards for REDD+ under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. As countries clarify their understanding of the safeguards and assess the policies and measures proposed for REDD+ implementation, a wide range of issues are covered including potential risks and benefits related to gender equality, the rights of indigenous peoples and local communities and their full and effective participation in REDD+ actions.

Within UN Environment’s REDD+ work, clear lessons are that at a landscape-scale, strategies for protection and production need to go hand in hand. A participatory process can be deployed to plan how investments

in improved yield are made on productive lands whilst protection and restoration of natural forest ecosystems is strengthened. Identification, mapping and awareness raising of the value of natural ecosystems for climate change mitigation and other ecosystem services should help to provide the evidence base for such a process. The UN-REDD Programme’s work on design and financing of REDD+ strategies and investment plans is helping its partner countries to move towards successful implementation of REDD+.

Through the Interfaith Rainforest Initiative, UN Environment is establishing an innovative strategy to engage with and empower faith-based organizations to deliver on the SDGs. The Interfaith Rainforest Initiative will mobilize and equip both high-level faith leaders and grassroots networks in major rainforest and consumer countries to engage in advocacy, action and leadership to protect rainforests.

UN Environment is helping to make the case for the protection, restoration and sustainable use of peatlands worldwide through the multi-partner Global Peatland Initiative, with a particular focus on tropical peat swamp forest. The “Smoke on Water” rapid response assessment gives a global overview of the state of knowledge.

Illegal wildlife and timber trade continues to be a global challenge requiring high-level attention and action. UN Environment, in partnership with the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES), UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) and other UN agencies continues to make strides in addressing this issue, including through the Wild for Life campaign. In addition, wild meat is an emerging issue with important ramifications in livelihoods, sustainability, food security and human health. UN Environment is a partner to the Collaborative Partnership on Sustainable Wildlife Management.

UN Environment stands ready to work with Member States and relevant stakeholders to ensure that SDG 15 is fully implemented. For further information or questions, please contact Musonda Mumba and Siham Drissi, Ecosystems Division at UN Environment: musonda.mumba@un.org and siham.drissi@un.org.

